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THE NEW SPIRIT OUT OF THE DARK¹
A PLAYLET OF FRANCE UNDER THE OLD RÉGIME

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New York City

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Pierre—A young collector for the Intendant
Michel—A peasant
Félice—Fiancée of Pierre; Michel's ward
Margot—Wife of Michel

Place—A small village in Provence

Time—*ca.* 1775; an April afternoon

ACT I

The scene is the miserably poor hut of the French peasant. There are no windows; the floor is just the beaten earth; the roof is of thatch. On one side of the room is a ladder leading to the loft above. Opposite is an old woman, huddled together in a chair in front of the wood fire.

Pierre (entering): Félice! Félice!

(The old woman points a trembling hand toward the loft. Pierre, a stalwart young man in city clothes but with the bronzed face of a peasant, crosses over to the ladder just as Félice appears at the top. Félice is young and fresh and gay. She wears the simple short skirt and the tight bodice of the peasant woman; her feet are bare.)

Félice (descending): Pierre! Pierre! You are back at last!

Pierre: At last! The journey to Paris is long and wearisome. It is twelve months since last I saw you.

Félice: It was wearisome for me, too—this waiting.

(They cross over to the bench on the wall opposite.)

¹ This playlet was written by Miss Feuerlicht when she was a Sophomore in Hunter College. In submitting it she said, "This playlet is one step in the process of correlating history and English work. It makes no pretense of being a play to be acted; it is simply an essay in play form showing the life of the French peasant under the Old Régime. As such it may be of interest to teachers of English who look outside their own department in their efforts at 'Englishing the young.'"

Pierre: Then you have been waiting, Félice?

Félice: For you, Pièrre? (*Smiling up at him.*) Need you ask? (*Her tone changes. Gaily.*) But tell me, how did you find Paris?

Pierre (warmly): Paris is wonderful—a veritable City of Joy. The court contrives new pleasures for each day.

Félice: And the queen?

Pierre: Once, by chance, I saw her. She rolled by in her splendid carriage. She looked like a star—brilliant gleaming at her throat and on her hands. She drove past and all the dirty, ragged gamins cheered, she was so splendid and so strange.

Félice: What are the court pleasures?

Pierre: They hunt and they dine. I have heard tales of their feasts, too wonderful to believe. They say the court dines from gold plate, that their banquet halls are strewn with flower petals and perfumed with incense, and that their viands are rare and costly beyond belief. And, Félice, I see there is one custom that the nobles took with them when they wearied of this insipid country life and left it for the gaiety of the court.

Félice: What is that?

Pierre: In Paris I heard tales of the purple wine they pour upon the lakes in the court ceremonies. Just now as I came over, the villagers were doing the same with their wine. To what river-god do they make the sacrifice?

Félice: Oh, you strangers! How little you know of the misery here! In your Auvergne, Pierre, the people may have time for gods. But here they are too weary with work even for prayer. That was no ceremony you saw. The villagers destroy their wine because the tax upon it is so great. They cannot afford to make life sweet with even their cheap red wine.

(*Michel enters as Félice speaks. He is gaunt, with intelligent eyes.*)

Michel: Greeting, M. Collector.

Pierre: Greeting, Michel. I have come, as you see, to ask you for Félice.

(*Félice laughs roguishly and runs to the door. Pierre catches hold of her before she can escape. He lets her go out and returns to Michel, who has seated himself on the bench.*)

Michel: You are too impatient, my son.

Pierre: I am anxious to settle down. This collecting for the Intendant is a weary business.

Michel: It ruined your father, did it not?

Pierre: Yes. I want to get out of it. My father lost his fortune because his heart was great. He could not snatch the bread—the last bit, sometimes—from the mouths of his fellow-villagers, from their little children. And the Intendant said “Pay!” so he paid.

Michel: And it ruined him. But how is it that you followed the same calling?

Pierre: In Auvergne, collecting is compulsory. We are all forced to take our turn at it, for a single permanent collector may be too dishonest. He favors his relations and friends unduly; he is severe with his enemies. If he be not one of the people, he may be cheated. And collecting is hard. Those who are poor cannot pay. Those who have more pretend they are poor, to keep the little they have. It is hard work, collecting.

Michel: But why then, when you came here, did you continue with it?

Pierre: The Intendant offered to send me to Paris. I was anxious to travel then. But now I want to settle down. Collecting has disheartened me—the poverty, the misery. If one does not crush the peasants, he himself is crushed by the Intendant.

Michel: And you are too like your father. As you say, these taxes are ruinous. The substitutes for the old feudal taxes are even more oppressive. The peasant of four centuries ago had no heavier burdens to bear than we today. The unfairness of it! The *gabelle* here is twice that in Auvergne. We are forced to destroy our natural salt and to buy at least twenty-eight pounds of the government salt each year—we, who have no bread to eat.

Pierre: Yes, the misery here is pitiful. In Paris the people have meat on holidays, at least. But here they cannot buy even wheat bread. The mean rye bread they starve on costs two sous a pound.

Michel: That is because the priests must have the best of our harvest. The bread is torn from the mouths of our famished children! How are we to live from harvest to harvest? The

Seigneur—*le hobereau*, indeed!—since he has lost his feudal privileges, feels no sympathy for us. He is a stranger and we his debtors. “Vile peasants,” he calls us. The curé, *le gentleman*, is interested only in his tithe. Our neighbors, if they rise above this oppression, leave with their wealth for the cities. The villages are choked with beggars, the prisons with those who cannot pay the *gabelle*. Yet you wish to settle here?

Pierre: I wish to settle here, for I have always felt a passion for owning land. Oh, to be my own master! With Félice I could conquer the earth.

Michel: Félice is a brave little woman. She has much of her father in her—her father the lawyer and my good friend. How well he could express the sentiment of our people—those things that I could only feel.

Pierre: He left Félice with you when he died?

Michel: Yes, to care for. And now I give her to you.

Pierre: To care for.

Michel: But you must care for her well. (*Pointing to the broken figure in the corner.*) My wife is a symbol of this régime. She was once young and gay like Félice. But the long hours spent over the plow in the fields have taken away her youth and her freshness. Her face is wrinkled from worry, and she is shriveled and worn from work. She is not yet fifty, but she is old. See that Félice—

Pierre: Félice shall always be young and lovely. With our own little hearth—

Michel (*sadly*): So I said once. That was before this. (*He points again to the old woman.*) I was once young like you, Pierre, and I too had that passion for a little home of my own. I think it is deep and undying in the heart of the peasant, that passion.

Pierre: Did you satisfy it?

Michel: You shall hear. I denied myself the bare necessities of life that I might buy this little piece of the earth. It began then. I had to pay the Seigneur the *lod* and the *vente*, for this farm is within the limits of his manor. With the purchase I had to pay the Intendant the *dime*. Had my property been within the church domain, I should have had to fill their hands as well.

Pierre: But, after all, you had your little farm.

Michel: So I thought. But that was not all. It was time to sow—and I sowed my very heart with that first corn. Before the seed had time to grow, the Seigneur's pigeons rooted it up.

Pierre: But why didn't you prevent that?

Michel: I could do nothing. The Seigneur is privileged. To divert him—this country life is so wearisome—he must have pigeons. That these spoil my crop makes very little difference. But the injustice did not cease here. After much toil and much patience, my crop was succeeding.

Pierre: And you were content.

Michel: Content I was until the Intendant summoned me for the *corvée*. All other work, said he, must give way before this. All the best workmen were taken away from their labor to toil without profit on the king's highways. Do we need roads? No! When have we time for travel? But the nobles, they need fine roads to drive upon. It is for them we give the *corvée*, and they—they are exempt! Those who can give the most are asked the least.

Pierre: That is true.

Michel (vehemently): And while we were out building their roads, these fine lords rode across our new crops. The open meadows were not good enough for them; short-cuts were more convenient. To ride down a hare, they ruined my corn.

Pierre: But, if you had fences—

Michel: In Provence we are allowed no fences. We must give the Seigneur his pleasure—if it takes our very lives.

A la sueur de ton visage
Tu gagneras ta pauvre vie
Après long travail et usage
Voicy la mort qui te convie!

But we do not die soon. We strive and toil and sweat—so that we may swell the King's purse. We must pay the *milice*—that the soldiers may live on us in time of war. We must pay the fiscal tax—that the Intendant may be paid for taking our money. When we buy, when we sell, we must pay. With frugality and endurance we save a little—the *gabelle* and the *taille* leave us with empty hands.

Pierre: And what do you get for this?

Michel: Nothing save misery. Our children are not educated; they grow up as ignorant, as rude, as we ourselves. Our greatest pleasure is the Sunday sermon. But we are too miserable for religion. The priests—representatives of God—disturb our labor and eat our profits. The nobles harass us. They ruin half our crops with their hunting, and they tax us if we cross the river to their mills.

Pierre: Their mills?

Michel: We are forced to use the mills of those that ruin us. We cannot spend the little we have where we will. In our hearts we are defiant—but we can do nothing.

Pierre (slowly): Your words awaken something within me. I have been asleep. But I do not know why you endure this. You plod along, patiently, without complaint, like the stupid donkey that works in our fields. But we are men—not asses! This thing must change.

Michel (hopelessly): The leaders of men are in the large cities. The country does not breed men of courage.

Pierre: But change must come. We cannot always be worn and weary—like that. (*He points to the bent figure huddled in her seat.*)

(*The voice of Félice is heard without, singing.*)

Come out in the sun and play,
For the grass is wet with rain.
April's here—and April's gay,
Laughing April's come again!

(*She enters skipping, with a wreath of small white flowers on her head.*)

Pierre (suddenly): Michel! This is the New Spirit!

Félice (going to him): The New Spirit, my dear?

Michel: You are both the New Spirit, my children—the glory of the coming France!

[*Curtain*]